

Challenge 4: Increase Use of Safety Belts and Child Safety Seats

Goal:

By 2010, increase statewide safety belt usage from the 2005 level of 92.5 percent to 95 percent, improve the use of child safety seats from 2005 level of 86.9 percent to 90.0 percent, and increase the percent of all vehicle occupant fatalities that are restrained to 70 percent - this is an indicator of higher total “observational” vehicle occupant restraint use, because a higher percentage of vehicle occupant fatalities that are restrained means that a higher percentage of total vehicle occupants are restrained.²⁴



Background

The combination of air bags and lap and shoulder safety belts offers the most effective safety protection available for passenger vehicle occupants. In 2005, safety belt use nationwide reached 82 percent and 14,903 lives were saved as a result.²⁵ Nevertheless, data confirm that at least 52 percent of passenger car occupants who die in crashes are not belted.²⁶ Because safety belts are approximately 50 percent effective for preventing fatalities in crashes in which motorists would otherwise die,²⁷ NHTSA believes the number of lives saved could be substantially increased—an additional 7,000 lives—if more people used safety belts. If the NHTSA assumptions hold true and all Californians properly used their restraint devices, California could avoid many fatalities every year.

California law requires all vehicle occupants to wear a safety belt. With a strong law, education, and enforcement, California reports a 92.5 percent usage of safety belts in motor vehicles for 2005 – the seventh highest in the country.²⁸ After the passage of a mandatory safety belt law in 1986, California's usage rate went from 26 percent to approximately 45 percent. By 1992, California's usage had increased to 71 percent. With the passage of the primary enforcement law in 1993, California's usage rate jumped to 83 percent, steadily climbing to the current rate.²⁹

Car seats, when correctly installed and used, are extremely effective in saving children's lives, reducing the risk of death by as much as 71 percent for infants. However, federal safety programs estimates that 85 percent of all car seats in use are improperly installed.³⁰

Figure 7 shows California's track record for three safety restraint performance measures: safety belt use, child safety seat use, and the percent of fatalities restrained (i.e., the percent of vehicle occupants killed restrained). Safety belt use shows a steady increase since 1995. Child safety seat use, while trending up, is punctuated by broad increases and declines. The steady gains seen in the percent of fatalities restrained indicates a reduction in unrestrained fatalities possibly due to the increase in safety restraint use by Californians. Ultimately, California would like to see 100 percent use of vehicle safety restraints. Only then will the maximum number of lives be saved due to the proper use of in-vehicle safety restraints.

²⁴ This Challenge Area uses 2005 data due to information from California OTS.

²⁵ Buckle Up America - www.buckleupamerica.org.

²⁶ NHTSA Traffic Safety Facts - 2004, Table 88.

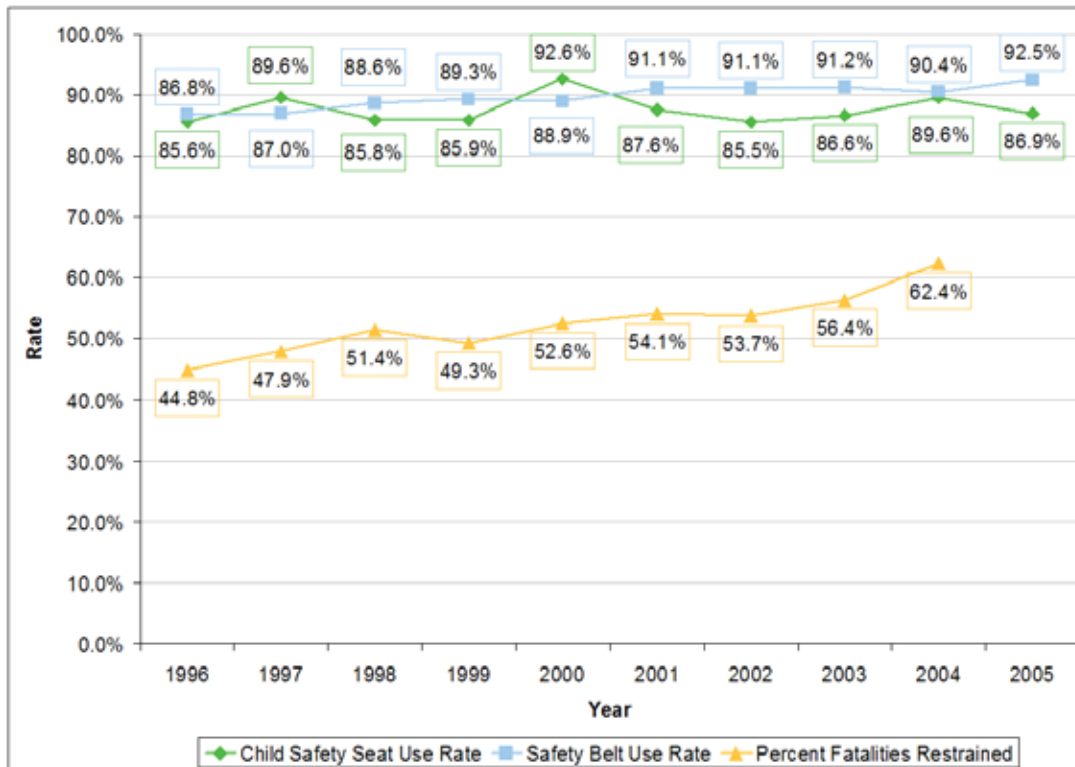
²⁷ Motor Vehicle Traffic Crash Fatality and Injury Estimates for 2000, NHTSA, November 2001.

²⁸ NHTSA Seat Belt Use Rates 2005 - <http://www-nrd.nhtsa.dot.gov/pdf/nrd-30/NCSA/RNotes/2005/809970.pdf>.

²⁹ The Prevention Institute - http://www.preventioninstitute.org/traffic_seatbelt.html.

³⁰ Safe Kids - www.safekids.org.

Figure 7 - Child safety seat and safety belt use rates, California, 1996-2005 ³¹



Strategies

California intends to employ the following strategies to increase safety belt use and occupant protection. The SHSP Implementation Plan will present specific action items to implement these strategies:

1. Improve the availability, use, and proper installation of child restraint systems.
2. Target education and enforcement for demographic groups that show low safety belt usage rates.
3. Collect safety belt use information from first responders.
4. Increase education and enforcement on teen safety belt usage.

Implementation Issues

Key issues affecting the implementation of action items to increase use of safety belts and child safety seats include:

1. Public perception that child safety seats are properly installed.
2. Limited resources for education about and inspection of child restraint systems.
3. Segments of the public remain unconvinced of the benefits of using safety restraints.

³¹ California Office of Traffic Safety Highway Safety Plan (HSP) - <http://www.ots.ca.gov/Publications>.